

A Short Story

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HAROLD CALIN



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TINY WINDOWS

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Capt. Kingsford cleaved the depths of space in a monomaniacal search for his personal devil. The tale of what happens when he finds it is reminiscent, on a cosmic scale, of Moby Dick. For every man like Kingsford, is there a white whale?

Heroes are not brave men; they are the fortunate victims of circumstance. They perform an act in life for which one usually pays with that life. But they do it with an unusual outcome. They do not die. So they are heroes. Captain Robert Kingsford returned alive from the first expedition to Aldebaran IX. He returned alone. He also commanded the second expedition. I was, or perhaps I should say, still an executive officer on this second expedition. If there is ever a third expedition here, Kingsford will not be the commander. This time he did not become a hero. He became a very stupid, very dead man.

I finished my fourth tour of duty in S Force about nine years ago. The third and fourth tours, as you know if you are familiar with S Force, were voluntary. Two is the limit they figure a man should spend in deep space on assigned duty. By the third, if he has not achieved a command, or rank at the least, he might be somewhat loathe to spend three years on a cruise not of his own choosing. After my fourth tour I sat for exams and got my captain's papers, so I signed on for a two-tour contract with an outfit operating Star Class Scouts out of Alpha Centauri X. By the end of this contract, I'd had it with space, and I settled down to a nice life of ease. You know, fishing and a house by the sea in the tropics, and a boat. That, of course, is where I made my mistake. You don't break the habits of over twenty years merely by putting some idle wishes into fulfillment. I reflect on it now because that idiotic notion about retirement is probably why I am here. That, and the determination of Captain Robert Kingsford to be a hero again, with remaining witnesses to bear him out.

I spend so much talk on myself at this point, incidentally, because I have lots of time in which to do this. Time to do anything I please, as if there was anything to do beside this. Except for the periods of hiding, of course. The hiding isn't bad, either. One gets used to it.

I've done this thing, this writing it all down, though it is on slates with a sharp stone as a stylus, about fifteen times. I've never found traces of the other times I've written it, and somehow I feel it should all be down. In the

beginning, just to express one's thoughts, even in writing, was enough. After a while, however, you sort of want to talk with someone, even if there is no one to talk with. I guess I've told myself this thing about a hundred times, in addition to the writings. It's changed a bit with the tellings. Also, I've never quite finished it. So actually, I'm creating the epic saga of a race. A race of which I am the sole member, and with no heirs apparent.

Well, it makes the time pass.

I, Philip Rogers, known as "Buck" to my less imaginative and non-spacemen acquaintances, decided to have done with retirement on Barbados after three years of the kind of living toward which all men strive. I had resided and dined in opulence, I had fished, I had traveled within the confines of atmospheric craft and I had seen the whole world. But living for itself, just as survival for itself, can be pretty well the same as death, and believe me, I can deliver virtuosic discourses on both subjects. Both tend to instill a certain cessation of all feeling. For that reason, incidentally, I've actually grown to look forward to the periods of hiding here. It's the only time I truly feel anything. But to get on, I got pretty well fed up with Barbados and the boat and the house. I had never married, principally because I'd never been fond of the idea of a woman standing on some "widow's walk" waiting for me. Three year cruises in deep space were hardly the short business trips of a commercial traveler. I had also, I imagine, never met the right woman. When I realized that this tropic paradise was becoming little more than a sort of waiting room for the voyage to hell or wherever I'll go, I began to cast feelers into the only other world I knew. I made certain inquiries among commercial space outfits for the possibility of a berth. I had let my papers lapse and learned that I was no longer eligible for a command. This was no great loss to me, since doing something was the primary objective. I could still gain an Exec's berth on any non-atmospheric craft. I reactivated my status, got my First Officer's papers, and was about to sign on for a mining expedition in the third asteroid belt of Alpha Centauri, when Kingsford completed his solo return from Aldebaran IX.

Basing speculations on the future profits to be had from Aldebaran IX, according to Kingsford's report, Anglo-Galactic Mining began almost immediately to outfit a new ship for a second expedition. I heard a bit of Kingsford's story, the landing, the surveys, the planet being almost a total ore deposit, and then the tragedy of the crew. One of Anglo-Galactic's geologists told me Kingsford's tale of how all of his crew was killed by

being drawn up in the feeding action of some gigantic flying animal, how he alone had managed to avoid this horror, and his agonizing fourteen month voyage back all alone.

I thought I was well able to imagine the feeling of being a sole survivor on an alien world, let alone the almost superhuman task of activating a ship's drive, even with delayed action timing, and plotting a course and manning a craft through fourteen months in space alone.

They were recruiting a complete crew for Kingsford's new ship, the Algonquin. She was new throughout, the drive and astrogating equipment being of a design with which I was unfamiliar. I began to understand why I was no longer eligible for command. A short three year absence and space technology had passed me by. I had read about the Shaller drive system in a technical journal during my retirement, but all through those three years I had made a rather strenuous effort to stay away from anything to do with my former calling. Actually, the Shaller system had outstripped all former star drives and was now in almost exclusive use in all ships geared for long range space penetration. It had conquered inertial resistance to the point where there existed absolutely no problems or stresses to either craft or personnel during acceleration and deceleration. If Kingsford's report about Aldebaran IX were true, and assays of the ore he'd brought back seemed to promise even more than he did, a berth on the Algonquin would be quite a prize. I flew to London and arranged a preliminary interview with an Anglo-Galactic vice president whom I had known for years. This would take some politics. From what I could figure, an Executive Officer's berth on the Algonquin, if she should make the strike that seemed imminent, would be worth millions, at the one-twentieth share normally apportioned to Execs on exploratory mining expeditions.

"Naturally, Kingsford will command," I was told. "But if you've a rated Exec's papers, Rogers, I think we may swing it." It would mean ten percent of my share, but the requisite of portions of officers' shares is one of the fringe benefits enjoyed by executives of corporations like Anglo-Galactic. There were two others with Executive tickets being touted by other politics within Anglo-Galactic, but my past record, my S Force dossier and my age were tremendous determinants. Or, perhaps, my politics were stronger. I was chosen and signed on for the expedition. I had still not met Kingsford. This was a bit odd. After all, I was to be his executive officer, his immediate subordinate, and I had not even been requested to present myself for his appraisal before selection.

After signing the contract, I was given a manifest of the ship, a complete set of drawings, and a small library of technical data for brushing up as well as familiarizing myself with the Shaller system theory and everything else that had rendered me somewhat obsolete during my retirement.

I came aboard ship three days before departure, still not having met any of the crew, let alone Kingsford. I was greeted by a junior Officer of the Day.

"Rogers," I said. "Philip Rogers. I'm the new Exec."

"I'm Williams," he said. "Welcome aboard the Algonquin, sir."

"This is quite a ship. A bit more than I'm familiar with."

"She's a bit more than most of us are familiar with," Williams said. "Isn't she a beauty?"

"I hope she shakes down without too many kicks."

"Yes, sir. Captain Kingsford is expecting you."

"Is he aboard?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

I rapped on the hatch, and as I entered his cabin the captain rose to greet me. The first thing I noticed was the eye patch. I had seen photographs of him taken since his return, but he had worn no patch then.

"Mr. Rogers," he said and extended his hand. "Welcome aboard."

He held his face slightly to one side, as if to give his one seeing eye as full a field of vision as possible. He noticed my preoccupation with the eye patch.

"I traveled fourteen months with a big hole here, Mr. Rogers," he said, motioning toward the patch. "I left my right eye where we are going." Then he closed his good eye and was silent for a time. I grew to accept these silences during conversations with him. "They fitted me with a false one when I returned, but advised against my wearing it in space. It's just as well. It gave me bad headaches. The patch is the same, but I don't feel a solid object lodged in my head. This is much better. Well, Mr. Rogers, what do you think of the Algonquin?"

"She's quite a ship, the little I've seen, sir."

"Yes. Mr. Rogers, I am a man disinclined to consorting with my crews. Your main duty aboard will be to convey my orders and requests to the crew. For all intensive purposes, you will appear to be in command. I suppose you have been well briefed on the purpose of this venture. If we succeed, and we shall, you will return a very rich man."

"I already am pretty well off," I said.

"I did not say pretty well off, Mr. Rogers. I said very rich. But, be that as it may, you have the look of a good officer about you. We'll get on, I'm sure."

"I hope so, sir," I said.

"You've had your own commands, Mr. Rogers. It's one of the reasons I'm glad you're with me. You are familiar with the problems of command. How is it that you were so lax as to let your papers lapse? Your command record is excellent."

"I was retired," I said. "I didn't think I'd ever need them."

"But the old habits do not die, do they?"

"I guess you can put it that way."

He looked at me and was quiet for a time. Then he looked up. "Have you ever felt, Mr. Rogers, that the whole of the universe was put together wrong? That perhaps man was placed here to undo some of God's bad work? Have you? Have you ever wished that all your life could be different? Have you ever seen evil? True evil, or its absolute personification?"

"I may have," I said. "But I've done well not to let my imagination run too rampant at times like that."

"Mr. Rogers, do you know how I lost my crew on the Essex?" The Essex had been Kingsford's command on the first expedition to Aldebaran IX.

"I've heard bits of it," I said.

"Aldebaran IX is a very strange planet. The atmosphere is extremely dense, entirely breathable, you understand, but dense almost to the point where you could compare it to water. The atmosphere is a true ocean of air. The surface of the planet has barren areas, trenches, shelves, sections of almost jungle-like undergrowth, and a very hazardously deceptive feeling of

warmth. It has no intelligent life. But it does have life. I can assure you of that. It has life. I experienced some of its life." Here, he paused again. When he resumed, his thoughts had gone beyond the life of Aldebaran IX. "Every ounce of matter on that planet contains the highest percentage of ore my counters have ever recorded. Ore, Mr. Rogers, the Ultimate Ore. The ore for which forty-two men under my command died. I intend that the dependents of those men will reap the benefits of that ore. I have instructed that my entire share be distributed among these heirs. This bit of information is to go no further than yourself, you understand."

"I understand," I said.

"Mr. Rogers," he then said, "were any of your past commands of a military nature?"

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Well, on an alien world, for example, have you ever organized a tactical reconnaissance program? Or perhaps planned a system of self covering defense positions?"

"Naturally," I said. "Military sciences are a large part of S Force operation."

"This I know, Mr. Rogers. But have you ever put these sciences into practice?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "May I ask why you wanted to know?"

"No, Mr. Rogers. But it is very good to have you aboard. Thank you, Mr. Rogers." He turned his attention suddenly to a manual on his desk. The interview seemed to be over. I left.

We spent the next few weeks at the Lunar base undergoing extensive testing. Finally the ship was ready for commissioning. Kingsford appeared to accept command and we lifted from orbit, locked into the pre-taped course and set about the business of a crushing inactive fourteen months of transit.

In all that I have written of the Algonquin incident, I have tried to portray Kingsford correctly. I don't know yet as I have succeeded. He was almost a complete recluse aboard ship. I virtually commanded, as he had predicted during our first conversation. When I did see him, it was to deliver routine reports on the ship and crew, but I began to observe that even these reports

did not particularly interest him. He had stopped shaving and had grown a long, very full dark beard. That, together with the eye patch, gave him the look of a very ancient mystic. He was always reading when I entered his cabin. His readings were restricted to the writings of St. Augustine, The City Of God I believe the volume was, and one or another of the first books of the Old Testament. After about nine months of my routine monologues, I stopped reporting altogether, and didn't see him for about three weeks. Nor did I receive any summons from him.

Then, during one of my periods of watch in the control room, I received a signal to report to the Captain's cabin. I entered, observed that despite his solitude the cabin and every accessory was in perfect order, nothing out of place. I knew that he allowed no orderly to enter the cabin, and yet there was no evidence that here was a man who was virtually a prisoner of his own choosing. We spoke for many hours that time. He asked about my past, my period of retirement, my reading habits, what I had read and what I thought of these readings. The conversation was limited almost entirely to myself, but Kingsford as an entity began to emerge for the first time since I had met him. He was altogether friendly. He wanted to know whether I was familiar with the Bible. When I said I was, he asked which section interested me most. I told him Ecclesiastes.

"Why Ecclesiastes, Mr. Rogers?"

"Well, because it seems to pretty well sum up all of life."

"There is far more to all of life than just vanity," he said.

"There is also far more to Ecclesiastes than just vanity," I said. "But I do imagine one could speak of purposes in life, and all of that. But aren't these in themselves a sort of vanity? Actually, we're not put here for any real reason. I don't think so, anyway. I've always felt that man is quite the master of his own destiny."

"And yet, Mr. Rogers, here you are," he said, smiling now, "aboard the Algonquin, after having quite conclusively decided that a life of grace and leisure was your true destiny. Do you not believe that perhaps your whole life was destined for that of a space officer? Perhaps molded from the very moment you were born to serve as my Executive Officer during this expedition?"

"I prefer to believe that I had stronger politics with Anglo-Galactic than the others who were after this berth."

"Do you really? Well, that's interesting enough. And tell me, Mr. Rogers, what of the crew? Do they still hold your faith to the last man?"

"I've seen enough men in enough situations to know that one cannot vouch for every man, even for himself, Captain. I still believe they are a good enough crew, yes."

"Good enough for what?"

I looked at him, smiling. "I believe that was actually a question for me to ask you."

"You think so? Perhaps. But, nonetheless, have any of them lost faith in Aldebaran IX?"

"I think it would be wise for you to address them and judge that for yourself," I said. "At this point, Captain, it's no more than any man aboard deserves."

"Nobody deserves anything, Mr. Rogers," he said firmly. "Don't you forget that. Keep them busy, Mr. Rogers. They shall have their wealth. Their speculations on that wealth is all that need concern them. And I shall have mine."

"Do you intend to address the crew at any time before we reach Aldebaran IX?"

"In good time, Mr. Rogers," he said. "In good time."

That was very much the way it went, Kingsford sticking to his cabin, reading his Bible, and the men occupying the monotony of space penetration with conjectures on their futures and on Aldebaran IX.

It took four more months to raise Aldebaran. When we ran onto the range of Aldebaran, things grew a bit tricky. There were no truly accurate charts, no perfectly matched coordinates for absolute bearings, only the tape of the Essex's astro-officer to trail in on. We set the tape and locked the controls in on them and turned all the scanners up full. We proceeded at ten percent power, gradually drawing in on the solar system of the red star, setting a solar orbit and drawing in toward the nebula of its system. Here, the Essex's tape became useless. They had made eight approaches before striking a parallel orbit, had not recorded the orbital timing of the various outer planets

of the system, and had sort of felt their way into the ninth planet. We would be obliged to do the same thing. Throne, the astrogation officer, took over control and eased the Algonquin down, decelerating gradually over a period of seven hours. He then brought us to a complete halt and looked up at me.

"We'll have to go back out and start over, sir," he said. "I have insufficient data to bring us through correctly. It might take weeks. I don't understand how the Essex made it. Probably a big piece of luck."

We lifted out of the solar plane and set the computers to coordinating positional data on Aldebaran's system. This time, the Essex's tapes were unnecessary. Throne plotted an exact course, determined to strike the ninth planet at the apogee of its orbit. None of Aldebaran's planets, incidentally, hold anywhere near a circular orbit. There are six belts of what can be classed as asteroids. These were very likely planets, or pairs of planets, at one time, but before the multi-rhythmed cycle of Aldebaran's system established itself, these planets ceased to exist, through what cataclysmic collisions I could not even begin to imagine.

We struck an orbit about Aldebaran IX without fault, and Throne returned command to me. There was a general announcement made throughout the ship that we were in orbit about the objective planet and shortly thereafter, the voice of Captain Kingsford, for the first time during the voyage, came over the communications system.

"Attention. This is Captain Kingsford speaking. Mr. Rogers will supervise the locking of all controls into this orbit about our objective, and members of the crew will assemble on the main deck. I wish to address you. My compliments to Mr. Throne on a fine piece of ship handling in this rudimentarily charted area. Thank you, Mr. Throne. In ten minutes, then, gentlemen." The men all looked up, as if suddenly reawakened to the fact that there was an officer aboard who was my superior.

"Well," I said, "I guess you'll now meet Capt. Kingsford."

We secured into orbit and made our way to the main deck. It was the first time in well over a year that all the men were there together, the first time since the commissioning ceremony. I remember now that I thought for a brief instant of how few of the men I had actually spoken more than several words with, how taut and almost mechanical this entire trip had been, how the crew held a common bond as in other ships, but not of friendship as on

other ships on which I had served. Here it was an alliance against the unknown. The unknown, represented not so much by Aldebaran IX, but by Captain Kingsford.

He entered the main deck through the hatch from the officers' quarters and all motion and sound among the crew stopped. He walked silently to the center of the deck, nodded briefly at me, and turned to face the men.

"Here are the facts on Aldebaran IX as I know them. The assays performed on the ore I brought back display a potential yield of almost ninety percent pure uranium. Ninety percent, gentlemen. You are, I am sure, aware of what this can mean for every last one of us. The extraction of this ore amounts to little more than erecting loaders on almost any site, and automatic conveyors to the refinery we will assemble for reducing the ore to a pure state. Our reaction engineers will then convey the element through the reaction process by which we will return to Earth with a hold filled with true plutonium. This is almost an automatic procedure and can be accomplished with an absolute minimum of operational difficulty. You will ask, then, why I requisitioned a manifest of so large a crew. The answer to this is precaution.

"There is a manner of animal life on Aldebaran IX which it is necessary that we subdue. It is a form of flying animal, quite large, which feeds through a suction action, ingesting matter with tremendous force, as it flies. This action not only nourishes the beast, it also forms the fuel for the ejection of waste gases that are its power for flight, jet propulsion, in essence. The animal is omnivorous, quite fast in flight, and leaves an area barren in its trail. It also defies all manner of remote observation. It came upon us in the Essex completely by surprise, though all our scanners and force beams were activated. It was the cause of the death of the entire crew. I alone was inside the Essex at the time. I escaped with the mere loss of an eye. How I managed to be the one to survive I cannot say. Perhaps it was fated that way. But, gentlemen, had we been prepared, had we been firmly entrenched and adequately armed, this beast would have presented no threat at all. We were not prepared then. Now we are. You are probably all familiar with the arsenal manifest. It was for this reason that I ordered the arms we now have on board.

"There has never been a reward without a hazard for men to face. This, then, is our hazard. And I assure you, no man has ever been within reach of so vast a reward. Is there anything else I can tell you? Mr. Rogers will establish a manner of arms distribution and a system of defense positions once we

make landfall. We will bring the Algonquin down on a site I have already determined. The site where the Essex met her fate."

Here, Kingsford stopped speaking. Several of the men shifted slightly. There was some clearing of throats, but no voices.

"Are there no questions, then?" Kingsford asked. Again, no one spoke. Perhaps they were awed by the sight Kingsford presented. He had been seen by no one on board since the commissioning but myself and a junior officer who piloted the shuttle at Alpha Centauri X. They knew him without the eye patch or the beard. He seemed to have aged twenty years since the departure. He had worn the false eye during the commissioning ceremony, and now, with the eyepatch and the beard, his face was darker, his expression pained.

Perhaps the men chose to accept Kingsford's optimism in the face of the fate of the Essex, considering that they were now in orbit about Aldebaran IX, and little more could be done but effect a landing. Anything else could constitute mutiny, and the alternative was the fortune Kingsford promised each man.

"Good," Kingsford said. He smiled. "Now, as you might imagine, I have a personal interest in this animal we will hunt." He motioned to the eye patch. "I left this behind me last time. Not to mention a crew of forty-two men." Here he paused in the way I had grown to know. His eye again focused on no particular object. After a time, he continued. He drew a paper from his tunic. "This, Mr. Rogers, is to be posted where all crew members can read it. I believe it will explain itself. Post it after we land." He handed me the sealed paper.

"Gentlemen," Kingsford said, "I thank you for your service. Are you with me in this business of Aldebaran IX and its flying animal?"

He smiled broadly. The men looked at one another, then slowly began to smile. Pierce, the armorer, made his way to Kingsford, his hand extended.

"Sir," he said, as Kingsford grasped his hand and shook it, "it's been too long since I've been on a good hunt. I'm with you all the way."

"Good," Kingsford said. "You are Pierce, am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Pierce."

That started it. The crew moved in on Kingsford, all shook his hand and pledged to do their share. After a long while, the camaraderie quieted down, and Kingsford excused himself, requesting Throne and me to join him in his cabin.

Kingsford sat down behind his desk and drew a chart from a file. He slid it across the desk so that Throne and I could see it.

"This is a photographic chart of one hemisphere of Aldebaran IX, gentlemen. I have marked the area in which the Essex was operating. There are many landmarks which you can use for triangular bearing to establish the exact position of the site. These are also marked, as you will note. Prior to the Essex landing, we dropped shuttles at many random points about the planet and drew cores and meter readings. This area proved to possess the greatest density of high percentage ore. It seems natural that we light here again. Do you have sufficient data here, Mr. Throne?"

Throne moved the chart closer to himself and studied it quietly for a moment. "I should think so, sir," he said. "This red marking, here. Would that indicate a mountainous area?"

Kingsford leaned over the chart. "Yes," he said.

"Good," Throne said. "Then I understand the markings."

"Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"No, sir. This chart seems complete enough. I'll have the ship dropped from orbit and scan the surface. We should be able to pick up check points to match the chart all right."

"Or you can activate the counters, Mr. Throne. This ship is equipped with long range equipment. The point of highest incidence of count will be your mark."

"Yes, sir. Will you be at the controls?"

"For the landing, yes. Mr. Rogers and I will be in the control room shortly."

"I'll get to this immediately, then," Throne said.

He left the cabin and Kingsford shifted his gaze to me. "You seem disapproving of my methods, Mr. Rogers."

"Not really, sir. Just your timing. You can hardly call it fair to have kept to yourself during all these months."

"Perhaps, but remember one thing, Mr. Rogers. You have been my buffer during all these months. You are a conspirator to the silence. I think that my address to the crew brought them very much over to my side, don't you?"

"They haven't had time to think," I said. "Or maybe they don't know how to, or prefer not to. They might wonder why you waited until now to tell them about your hunting plans. They might begin to feel, much as I do now, that this whole trip should never have taken place."

"No, Mr. Rogers. It had to take place. It had to."

"Why?"

Kingsford didn't answer right away. He looked at me quietly for a time. Then a slow smile spread across his face.

"For the betterment of mankind, Mr. Rogers," he said. "You see, I believe that the crew of the Essex met a fate that was destined long before preliminary surveys of Aldebaran IX were even projected. Before, even, men developed the power to travel into space. It was a warning. That is my belief, and my faith."

He was interrupted by the communications buzzer. They had scanned the planet and matched the chart. Throne had located the landing site and were awaited in the control room. We both stood.

"I take it, Mr. Rogers, that you are not with me in this Aldebaran venture."

"I am Executive Officer aboard this ship, Captain. I know the meaning of performing my duties. But if you are looking for moral approbation in all of this, I cannot give it. The way I put it all together, I think it would be less a waste if we were to raise ship right now and set a course directly for Earth."

"Why? Are you afraid, Mr. Rogers?"

"No. It's just that I'm not given much to the idea of playing God."

Kingsford stopped at the door. "I seem to have underestimated you, Mr. Rogers," he said. He opened the cabin hatch and stepped through.

The setting down went off without a hitch, and the job of establishing Kingsford's precautionary system began. I was the first out of the ship, meeting the density of the atmosphere for which Kingsford had prepared me. It was thick, yet not oppressive like the heavy tropical atmosphere on Earth. It did not restrict movement, the gravitational force being less than that of Earth. One seemed to counter-balance the other to give a man equal physical capabilities to those on Earth. With Pierce, I scouted the area within a few miles of the ship, chose certain high grounds for emplacements and watches, then returned and began the deployment of the arms and crew to the chosen spots. I worked out a schedule of rotation so that the outer emplacements would be manned for no more than three hours by any one group. During this entire operation, there was no sign of animal life on the planet. The climate seemed sub-tropical and vegetable life proportional to this climate abounded. Fruit trees and plains of grass, forests and spots of dense undergrowth, much like the greenery of a dozen planets I had seen. But there was no sound, and absolutely no discernible movement of air. The mountain chain I had seen noted on Kingsford's chart stood off in the far horizon, and the land about us was all rolling hills and plains.

During the apportioning of arms, I remembered Kingsford's paper to be posted. I got it from my cabin and read it. It was a public statement in which Kingsford offered ten percent of his captain's share to the first man to spot the quarry. This reduced the potential benefits to the heirs of the Essex's crew by ten percent. I noted the fact, but gave it little thought. It was Kingsford's affair. I opened the general communications switch and read the statement to the crew. The response was electrifying. Shouts and cheers from every quarter of the ship. The general air of a group of sportsmen on a chase rapidly took over the whole feeling of the expedition, and, as executive officer charged with posting the watch, I was approached by most of the crew members with entreaties and even bribes by each, to be assigned to the outermost emplacements. Kingsford's methods certainly bore results. It kept everybody from thinking, but I do not believe that this was his intention.

I did not see Kingsford for almost two days. While I busied myself with the elaborate mechanisms of warning and defense, he and the small group of geologists and reaction engineers, who also insisted on drawing guard duty, went through the mechanics of erecting the loaders and converters, then the refining equipment for reducing the ore to its pure state, and the reactor that would further refine the prize to its absolute, the purpose for the whole expedition, a cargo of plutonium such as man had never seen.

During the two days of setting up the defense system, I grew to feel quite comfortable on Aldebaran IX. I roamed the hills and depressions, brought back certain fruits and vegetables and subjected them to tests and discovered that they were entirely palatable. Perhaps these pastoral musings were a premonition on my part or simple scientific curiosity. I have never dwelt too long on it.

The planet cycle of Aldebaran IX is relatively short, about seventeen hours as measured on Earth. We grew accustomed to relatively short, but intensive periods of work and the remainder of the time was spent in sheer luxuriance at the idea of being out of doors after so many months in space. No sign of Kingsford's quarry appeared, and the excitement of the hunt began to dwindle somewhat among the crew. I, myself, lost much of my feeling of apprehension, and began to relax in the foretaste of future wealth. The reactor was completed on the second day, and the production of the man-made element began. The second night, I dined with Kingsford.

As my tension had relaxed, quite the opposite, it seemed, had happened to him. He was more brooding than ever, more responsive to the slightest sound. He ate practically nothing and said little. Late in the evening, he began to speak, seemingly for the first time aware that he had a guest.

"You wonder about my monster, Mr. Rogers, don't you?"

"Yes. I do wonder a bit."

"So do I. Do you still think it would be less waste if we had returned without making landfall?"

"I'd imagine it was a bit soon to say."

"Do you understand now, Mr. Rogers, why I maintained my silence about this place? Why I spoke little of the Essex and her crew? You have noticed, I am sure, that absolutely no vestige of either the crew or the equipment is to be seen. Only a newly green pasture where there was a desert when I escaped. Such is the devastation to which we might be subjected, except for your excellent defense pattern. A devastation so complete as to leave no sign of devastation whatsoever. Have you ever seen anything like it, Mr. Rogers?"

"No."

"This," he said, indicating the eye patch. "This is the only sign that forty-two men perished within five kilometers of this spot. And I have returned now. Now the waiting."

"I don't understand." I said.

"I told you once that I believe all this of Aldebaran IX was fated. I believe also that Aldebaran IX was so composed of uranium to be found and exploited for the complete betterment of mankind. That is the irony. For two hundred years, now, we have spoken of unleashing the atom for the betterment of mankind. But what more has come of it than a highly developed science of the destruction of mankind, and the gradual debasing of the entire universe. Man must warrant his own betterment, Mr. Rogers, and it is therefore that Aldebaran IX was placed well within the reaches of Hell, a very deceptive Hell, but Hell no less. Man was meant to have achieved god-like proportions before he would discover this place. The men of the Essex were not god-like, believe me. Nor are the men of the Algonquin. Nor are you.

"Aldebaran IX is a world not meant for men to walk upon. It is a disguise. There are gardens and deserts, jungles and plains. But there are no oceans. The ocean here is the atmosphere. Should I have told the men of the Algonquin that in this ocean swims a Leviathan that defies the very existence we claim, Mr. Rogers? This is our adversary. This is the killer of the crew of the Essex. This is the sum total of man's stumbling blocks, his barrier to his own betterment. A giant, half the length of the Algonquin, almost its girth, with eyes each as large as a man.

"Kill him, Mr. Rogers, and you have conquered man's evil. You will see him. You will see why this had to be."

I could say nothing. I believed then that he was more than a little mad, but he had instilled a strange fear in me. I wanted to be away from all of this. I wanted no part in this undoing of man's evil.

"I can only say that I feel that a man should be given a choice of participating or not in this madness," I said, the words sounding very dry and brittle.

"No, Mr. Rogers. No. Give man a choice and he will refuse."

"I must go now, Captain Kingsford. It's time I made my rounds of the emplacements."

"I'll join you, Mr. Rogers," he said, and we left the ship together. I never entered the hatch of the Algonquin again.

We spent the entire night covering the perimeter of the defense positions. The emplacements were spaced at about half-mile intervals, each covering the other, and each manned by two of the crew. We had armed each position with a fixed base nuclear rifle of recoilless design, as well as small arms for the individual men. The night was pervaded by a heavy silence, broken only by the distant humming of the refinery and the reactor. The men at the emplacements spoke little. The spirit of the hunt, as I have said, had dwindled, but there was a feeling about this night that hung over all of us.

Along toward first light we were heading back into the center of the camp, having completed a full circuit of the perimeter on foot. The suits we wore were light enough, despite the helmets we needed for communications, but there was still the feeling of restriction, even without the face plates. I was tired. I had gone almost twenty hours without sleep. As we walked, Kingsford held a hand to his head just above the eye patch. He had a headache and his good eye was red. He stopped a moment to rub the eye and take a cigarette from a packet in his tunic. He offered me one and struck his lighter so that we could light the cigarettes. Suddenly, he held his hand very still.

"Look, Mr. Rogers," he said. "Look. The flame. How it flickers. The air is moving. The air is moving, Mr. Rogers."

I turned my head up automatically, but detected no change in the stillness. Kingsford studied the flame and began to smile. Then my headset came alive with a voice.

"Captain. Captain Kingsford. This is Pierce. It's blowing up a breeze here. It's becoming a wind as I speak. The sun has not quite risen, but it's almost light enough. I don't see anything, but I feel the wind. It's stronger each second."

We could feel it now. Gradually at first, then stronger, the air began to stir and move in the direction of Pierce's emplacement. Other positions began to report the movement in the air. Then the first light of Aldebaran broke over the horizon in a brilliant red glow and we heard Pierce again.

"I see it," he called. "It's like a ship. It seems bigger than the Algonquin. Captain, it's moving toward us, but not directly at us. I make the distance to

be about seven miles, but I can't be sure. I don't know how big it is. What's its size, Captain?"

"Has it a long snout and sort of a funnel at the front?" Kingsford demanded.

"Yes, sir. It's moving very fast and there's a cloud rising before it, and the cloud is disappearing into the funnel. I can hear it now. It must be closer than I thought. Lord, it's huge. The wind is much stronger now. It's getting difficult to breathe."

"And the eyes, Pierce. Can you see the eyes?"

"No, sir. But we can't breathe too well here now. It's coming closer. Closer."

We could see it now. It was moving in a direction generally toward the camp, but if it maintained its course, it would bypass us by a good distance. It was huge. Much greater than Kingsford had described, at least so it seemed. Slender at the front and tapering to a huge girth near its tail. A great billow of dust rose before its path, disappearing in the bugle-like snout. The wind increased far beyond any I'd ever known, and then I could see the eyes.

"You see, Mr. Rogers," Kingsford shouted. "It has expected us. It is grown. Six times its size, Mr. Rogers. The men of the Essex nurtured it well. Ha!"

The men at all positions were calling over the communications, but none had fired their weapons yet.

"Commence firing," Kingsford shouted his order. He turned to me. "There, Mr. Rogers. There is your Leviathan." I could barely hear him for the wind. Then I realized that it was only because we had the communications on that I could hear him at all, though he was but two feet from me.

"Stop them, Captain," I shouted. "If we don't fire, it will pass us."

"No, Mr. Rogers. Hear this, men. The shot that fells the beast gets another ten percent of my share. Now, Mr. Rogers. Now I get my eye back, and the men of the Essex, and the right to bring the fruit of this Hell back to Earth. Now is the moment all mankind has waited for. Now. Will you deny me that? Will you, Mr. Rogers?"

I couldn't answer. It was too late. One of the emplacements had brought its weapon to bear and fired at what seemed point blank range. The sound was deafening above the roar of the wind. I felt the wind tear at my clothes and saw the blinding flash and then heard the sound of the detonation. Kingsford stood firm through all this. "Again," he shouted. "Again." Then he fell forward, the wind tearing at him. I fell to my knees then, the wind dragging at me, and felt a mound at my side. It was the base of a projection of stone. I undid my waist clasp and secured myself to the projection and reached out to Kingsford. I grasped his wrist and hung on as I saw the flame and smoke whirled away and sucked into the funnel of the monster as it turned toward the center of the camp. Kingsford was like a limp rag, dragging in the wind against my hand. The animal had veered directly toward the camp site. It was over the ship. It dwarfed the Algonquin, easily ten times its size. I saw solid objects floating toward its funnel mouth. I was deafened by the roar of the wind now, but I saw that the objects were men and equipment. I thought I heard screams, but it must have been the roaring of the wind. Then I saw both its eyes, huge yet blind, and everything about me rushing toward the mouth of the funnel. Then the ship began to come apart and I could see nothing in the devastating clouds of dust and smoke that surrounded me, a solid mass fleeing at unbelievable speed toward a center I could no longer determine. Once, during this horror, I felt a weight lifted from the strain on my body. I did not realize at once that it was Kingsford being torn away from my grasp. After that, I gave myself up to what might be. I could no longer breathe, no longer see, no longer feel, but by some monstrous miracle, the stone projection to which I was clasped held securely and only in semi-consciousness was I aware of the gradual diminution of all sound and wind, and a slow returning to silence of this vast hell of a planet. Some time later, I opened my eyes to the magnificent glare of early morning sunlight in full splendor.

Nothing about me had remained. Of the men, the emplacements, the conveyors, refinery or reactor, indeed of the Algonquin herself I saw nothing more. Only a plain. A vast, arid plain, where once there had been forty some men and myself, a ship that mirrored the pinnacle of human technology, and the semblance of a habitable, arable land. I was alone.

I remember now that I forced myself to stand. I remember that I walked for endless hours, searching but not finding the least sign of a crew, a ship, a life in which I was Executive Officer Philip Rogers. I remember I spoke one word over and over again as I walked, the word vanity, and I cried aloud to myself until I could think and walk and speak and cry no more. Then I fell to the ground and dug my way into a sleep of unconsciousness for I don't know

how long. When I wakened, it was night, a night this time with the cool light of two moons casting a double shadow of my hand as I raised it for something that my eyes could see. I stood and walked again. I walked until the night began to fade and I was in a land of greens and warm forest shadows.

I have grown to recognize every sign of the animals. When they come, a desert remains in their path. I must find another oasis. But things grow rapidly here. A desert is replaced by a pasture for their grazing in not too many weeks, or it may be months. I no longer count. Kingsford was wrong, of course. This was not his personification of evil. Nor had his monster grown in his absence. They are the sole specie of this place. After a time you grow to recognize the difference, and I have never seen two the same size, or looking exactly alike. I learned to hide as I have learned to live on this planet. I live, but I wonder whether it can be called a life. I write about what happened, and I tell it to myself aloud. But I prepare no warning for others, for my every waking hour is devoted to the hope that no others will ever come. This is a planet which was never meant for man to discover. Of that, Captain Kingsford was indisputably right.

(Here, the telling of the tale was interrupted. The time of hiding had come again. Philip Rogers retired to the place he had chosen in this forest and bound the clasps he had fashioned and listened for the wind to rise and the sounds that grew louder, and he thought, "This time. Perhaps this time. Yes, perhaps this time.")

THE END



TINY WINDOWS

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